

CHAPTER 34

Al-Saba': The Saba'

(REVEALED AT MAKKAH: 6 *sections*; 54 *verses*)

The title of this chapter is taken from that of a city of the same name, i.e., *Saba'*, which was situated in Yaman and was destroyed by a flood. The warning given in this chapter applies to all nations that are made great and prosperous but fall into luxurious habits. Ease engenders evil, which brings decay and ruin. Hence it was a warning to the Quraish, no doubt, but it is equally a warning to all nations who are made masters of the earth but fall into the ways of ease and luxury and suffer the consequences.

The first section asserts the truth of the judgment, a judgment the truth of which is not witnessed only in the life after death, but is clearly seen working in this very life. This judgment overtakes individuals as well as nations, and two instances are cited in the second section of how prosperous nations are swept out of existence when they fall into evil ways. Judgment will therefore overtake the Quraish; and their false deities, we are told in the third section, will not avail them in the least. An encounter will be brought about between the two parties, resulting in a victory for the Muslims. The fourth section describes the plight of the leaders of evil, the leaders and the followers blaming each other. The fifth states that their very deities will then be unable to help them, and that they will be punished, as deniers of Truth have always been punished. The last section asserts that Truth will prosper and falsehood vanishes before it.

With this chapter is introduced another group of six Makkan chapters, which in all probability belong to the middle Makkan period. This, the first chapter of this group, begins with *al-hamdu li-llâh, praise be to Allâh!* While the last chapter of this group, the 39th, ends with exactly the same words, and thus Allâh is praised for bringing about the triumph of Truth, which is the subject-matter of these chapters.

SECTION 1: Judgment is certain

In the name of Allâh, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

1 Praise be to Allâh! Whose is whatsoever is in the *samâwât* and whatsoever is in the earth, and to Him be praise in the Hereafter! And He is the Wise, the Aware.

2 He knows that which goes down into the earth and that which comes out of it, and that which comes down from *samâ'* and that which goes up to it.

And He is the Merciful, the Forgiving.

3 And those who disbelieve say: The Hour will never come to us. Say: Yea, by my *Rabb*, the Knower of the unseen! It will certainly come to you. Not an atom's weight escapes Him in the *samâwât* or in the earth, nor is there less than that nor greater, but (all) is in a clear book,^a

4 That He may reward those who believe and do good. For them are forgiveness and an honourable sustenance.

5 And those who strive hard in opposing Our Messages, for them are a painful chastisement of an evil kind.

6 And those who have been given knowledge see that what is revealed to thee from your *Rabb* is the Truth and it guides into the path of the Mighty, the Praised.

3a. The verse states the immutable law that every deed is followed by a consequence, and nothing should be looked upon as too small to produce an effect. The two verses that follow are an illustration of this law; good meets with a good reward and evil with an evil punishment. It should be noted that the Qur'ân here speaks of an *atom* and also of something less than an atom. As *less than an atom* could only be a part of an atom, evidently the suggestion here is that an atom could be broken into pieces.

7 And those who disbelieve say: Shall we show to you a man who informs you that, when you are scattered the utmost scattering, you will then be in a new creation?

8 Has he forged a lie against Allâh or is there madness in him? Nay, those who believe not in the Hereafter are in torment and in far error.

9 See they not what is before them and what is behind them of the *samâ'* and the earth? If We please, We can make them low in the land or bring down upon them a portion of *samâ'*. Surely there is a sign in this for every servant turning (to Allâh).^a

SECTION 2: Favours followed by Retribution

10 And certainly We gave Dâwûd abundance from Us: O mountains, repeat praises with him,^a and the birds, and We made the iron pliant to him,^b

11 Saying: Make ample (coats of mail), and assign a time to the making of coats of mail and do ye good. Surely I am Seer of what you do.^a

9a. This is the ever-recurring argument of the Arabic Glorious Qur'ân. The disbelievers deny the last Resurrection, the life after death, the sublime principle of the accountability of human actions, which forms the only basis of high morals, and they are told that, as a proof of the truth of the Resurrection, they will be brought low in this very life for standing in the way of the advancement of Truth. It is compared with the coming of a portion from heaven because they would not be able to avert it.

10a. *Awwaba* literally signifies *he returned* (*Arabic-English Lexicon* by Edward William Lane), and applied to a company of men, *it journeyed by day* (*Arabic-English Lexicon* by Edward William Lane), and metonymically *âba* or *awwaba* signifies *he returned from disobedience to obedience* or *repeated the praises of Allâh*. By the mountains repeating the praises of Allâh, some understand the praising of Allâh in the sense in which all inanimate objects are spoken of in the Arabic Glorious Qur'ân as glorifying Allâh, while others think that the mountains' echoing Dâwûd's loud praises is meant. But the mention of birds, the attendants of a victorious army (see 16:79a), and iron along with it shows that the reference is to the conquests of Dâwûd; and the singing of praises by the mountains therefore carries the significance of those residing on mountains yielding to Dâwûd. Or the

jibâl (mountains) may here signify *mighty men* (see 20:105a), who are thus commanded to march along with him to conquer the enemy.

10b. The making of the iron pliant to him signifies the extensive use of iron by him in his battles, and so do the coats of mail in the next verse.

12 And (We made) the wind (subservient) to Sulaimân; it made a month's journey in the morning and a month's journey in the evening;^a and We made a fountain of molten brass to flow for him.^b And of the *jinn* (evil leaders) there were those who worked before him by the command of his *Rabb*. And whoever turned aside from Our command from among them, We made him taste of the chastisement of burning.^c

13 They made for him what he pleased, of synagogues and images, and bowls (large) as watering-troughs and fixed cooking-pots.^a Give thanks, O people of Dâwûd! And very few of My servants are grateful.

11a. The subject of the previous verse is continued. Dâwûd is enjoined to prepare himself and his army for severe battles, hence the necessity of coats of mail to save life. Some think that the commandment signifies that Dâwûd should not take anything from the treasury for his own livelihood, and that he should earn his livelihood by an industry, such as the making of coats of mail (*Kashshâf* (Commentary), by Abu-l-Qâsim Maḥmûd ibn 'Umar al-Zamakhsharî). *Sâbighât* is the plural of *sâbighah*, which is an adjective meaning *ample* or *vast*, and is here considered as standing for the noun which it qualifies, for you say *dir'-un sâbighah-un* meaning *an ample coat of mail*. But you also say *nî'mat-un Sâbighât-un*, i.e., a complete benefit (*Arabic-English Lexicon* by Edward William Lane), and the order given here may imply the doing of perfect deeds. *Sard* means *coats of mail* or *their rings* (*Arabic-English Lexicon* by Edward William Lane), and *qaddara* signifies *he made it according to a measure* or *proportioned it*, and also *he assigned a particular time for it* (*Arabic-English Lexicon* by Edward William Lane). *Al-Tafsîr al-Kabîr* (Commentary), by Imâm Fakhr al-Dîn Râzî favours the latter interpretation, i.e., Dâwûd is commanded not to employ his whole time in such occupations, for the real object is to do good.

12a. See 21:81a. The significance is that Solomon's ships were made to traverse a month's journey in a day by favourable winds. For Sulaimân's navy, see 1 Kings 9:26. But it should be noted that *rîh* (wind) means also *power* or *dominance* or *conquest* (*Arabic-English Lexicon* by Edward William Lane), and therefore the meaning may be that Sulaimân's kingdom was so large that it was a month's journey to the East and a month's journey to the West.

12b. "Also he made a molten sea of ten cubits from brim to brim" (2 Chronicles 4:2).

12c. These *jinn* were no other than the strangers whom Sulaimân subjected to his rule and forced into service. See 2 Chronicles 2:2 –18: "And he set threescore and ten thousand of them to be bearers of burdens, and fourscore thousand to be hewers in the mountain". Note that the *jinn* of this verse are the *shayâtîn* of 38:37 — "(We subjected to Sulaimân) the *shaiyâtîn*, every builder and diver" — where the *shayâtîn* or the evil ones are explained by the Qur'ân itself to be no others than the builders and divers whom Sulaimân had forced into labour. In the first volume, Tabrezî in his commentary on *Himâsah* remarks: "Abû 'Ulâ says the Arabs speak of the *jinn* frequently, likening a man who is clever in executing affairs to the *jinnî* and the *shaiâtîn* or evil men, and hence they say *his jinn is gone*, when they mean that he became weak and abased". This explanation, along with that which the Qur'ân itself affords, settles the question of the *jinn* and the *shayâtîn* employed by Sulaimân.

14 But when We decreed death for him, naught showed them his death but a creature of the earth that ate away his staff. So when it fell down, the *jinn* saw clearly that, if they had known the unseen, they would not have tarried in humiliating torment.^a

15 Certainly there was a sign for Saba' in their abode — two gardens on the right and the left. Eat of the sustenance of your *Rabb* and give thanks to Him. A good land and a Forgiving *Rabb*!

16 But they turned aside, so We sent upon them a violent torrent, and in place of their two gardens We gave them two gardens yielding bitter fruit and (growing) tamarisk and a few lote-trees.^a

17 With this We requited them because they were ungrateful; and We punish none but the ingrate.

13a. For the graving of cherubims on the walls, see 2 Chronicles 3:7; for the casting of oxen, 2 Chronicles 4:3; for the making of lavers, pots, basins, etc., 2 Chronicles 4:11, 14.

14a. The reference in *the creature of the earth that ate away his staff* is to his son's weak rule, under whom the kingdom of Sulaimân went to pieces. It appears that Sulaimân's successor according to the Holy man-made Bible: Rehoboam, led a life of luxury and ease, and instead of acting on the advice of the older men, he yielded to the pleasure-seeking wishes of his companions (1 Kings 12:13), and it is to his luxurious habits and easy mode of life that the Arabic Glorious Qur'ân refers when it calls him *a creature of the earth*. The eating away of his staff signifies the disruption of the kingdom. The *jinn*, as already remarked, mean the rebellious tribes who had been reduced to subjection by Sulaimân, and who remained in subjection to the Isrâ'îlites for a time, until the kingdom was shattered. This instance, as well as the one following, contains a warning for the Muslims as to the result of falling into luxury and ease, by which, however, they benefited little; the ultimate fate of the respective kingdoms of the Umayyads and Abbasides was the same as that of Sulaimân's kingdom. See also 38:34a.

16a. Saba' was "a city of Yaman, also called *Ma'ârab*; it was about three days' journey from *San'â*. The bursting of the dyke of *Ma'ârab* and the destruction of the city by a flood are historical facts, and happened in about the first or second century of our era" (Palmer).

It is usual to speak of two gardens, for large cultivated areas were bounded by a garden on each side.

18 And We made between them and the towns which We had blessed, (other) towns easy to be seen,^a and We apportioned the journey therein: Travel through them nights and days, secure.

19 But they said: Our *Rabb*, make longer stages between our journeys.^a And they wronged themselves; so We made them stories and scattered them a total scattering. Surely there are signs in this for every patient, grateful one.

20 And the *Iblîs* (evil ones) indeed found true his conjecture concerning them, so they follow him, except a party of the believers.

21 And he has no authority over them, but that We may know him who believes in the Hereafter from him who is in doubt concerning it. And your *Rabb* is the Preserver of all things.

SECTION 3: A Victory for the Muslims

22 Say: Call upon those whom you assert besides Allâh; they control not the weight of an atom in the *samâwât* or in the earth, nor have they any partnership in either, nor has He a helper among them.^a

18a. The cities were so close to each other that one could be seen from the other, or they were conspicuous from the road. It is an indication of the great prosperity of the country. The blessed towns are the towns of Syria, with which they carried on trade.

19a. It is not necessary that they should have thus prayed in words. It is a description of their actual condition, i.e., they were not grateful for the blessings and fell into evil ways, which resulted in punishment overtaking them.

Speaking of the trade of Yaman with Syria, Muir says: “The commerce assumed great dimensions and enriched the nation ... and, which is remarkable, the number of stages from Hadramaut to Ayla, given ... as seventy, exactly corresponds with the number at the present day”. The reference in the previous verse to the appointment of the journey might be to these stages.

22a. It refers to the helplessness of the supposed deities to assist their votaries when distress overtakes them.

23 And intercession avails naught with Him, save of him whom He permits. Until when fear is removed from their hearts, they say: What is it that your *Rabb* said? They say: The Truth. And He is the Most High, the Great.

24 Say: Who gives you sustenance from the *samâwât* and the earth? Say: Allâh. And surely we or you are on a right way or in manifest error.^a

25 Say: You will not be asked of what we are guilty, nor shall we be asked of what you do.

26 Say: Our *Rabb* will gather us together, then He will judge between us with truth. And He is the Best Judge, the Knower.^a

27 Say: Show me those whom you join with Him as associates. By no means (can you)! Nay, He is Allâh, the Mighty, the Wise.

28 And We have not sent you but as a bearer of good news and as a warner to all humankind, but most human beings know not.^a

29 And they say: When will this promise be (fulfilled), if you are truthful?

24a. The meaning is that as surely as you are in manifest error, so surely are we on a right way.

26a. This is a prophecy which was fulfilled in the first decisive battle which clearly decided the issue between the Muslims and their opponents. The question in verse 29 asks the question: ‘when will this promise be fulfilled?’ — Which makes it quite clear.

28a. The Prophet is repeatedly spoken of as having been sent as a messenger to all people, in the earliest as well as the later revelations. He is called “A warner to the nations (25:1), “A mercy to the nations” (21:107), and so on. In one place, his being sent to men is qualified by the word *jams‘-an* (7:158), which means *all*. Here it is qualified by the word *kâffah*, which means *all without an exception*. This word is derived from *kaff*, which means *preventing* or *withholding*, the implication being that it includes *all and does not prevent* or *withhold* anyone, or *all without an exception*.

30 Say: You have the appointment of a day^a which you cannot postpone by an hour, nor hasten on.

SECTION 4: The Leaders of Evil

31 And those who disbelieve say: We believe not in this Qur'ân, nor in that which is before it.^a And if you could see when the wrongdoers are made to stand before their *Rabb*, throwing back the blame one to another! Those who were reckoned weak say to those who were proud: Had it not been for you, we would have been believers.

32 Those who were proud say to those who were deemed weak: Did we turn you away from the guidance after it had come to you? Nay, you (yourselves) were guilty.

33 And those who were deemed weak say to those who were proud: Nay, (it was your) planning by night and day when you told us to disbelieve in Allâh and to set up likes with Him. And they will manifest regret when they see the chastisement. And We put shackles on the necks of those who disbelieve. They will not be requited but for what they did.

34 And We never sent a warner to a town but those who led easy lives in it said: We are disbelievers in that with which you are sent.

30a. The first encounter between the Muslims and their enemies took place in the battle of Badr, after the first year of the Flight had passed away. Elsewhere the same question is answered by the words: "Maybe somewhat of that which you seek to hasten has drawn nigh to you" (27:72).

31a. They reject not only the Qur'ân but also previous revelation, because it contains prophecies about the appearance of the Holy Prophet.

35 And they say: We have more wealth and children, and we cannot be punished.

36 Say: Surely my Rabb amplifies and straitens provision for whom He pleases, but most human beings know not.^a

SECTION 5: Wealth does not stand for Greatness

37 And it is not your wealth, nor your children, that bring you near to Us in rank; but whoever believes and does good, for such is a double reward for what they do, and they are secure in the highest places.^a

38 And those who strive in opposing Our messages, they will be brought to the chastisement.

39 Say: Surely my *Rabb* amplifies provision for whom He pleases of His servants and straitens (it) for him. And whatsoever you spend, He increases it in reward,^a and He is the Best of Providers.

40 And on the day when He will gather them all together, then will He say to the *malâ'ikah*: Did these worship you?

41 They will say: Glory be to You! You are our Protecting Friend, not they; nay, they worshipped the *jinn*; most of them were believers in them.^a

36a. This expression is always used to signify that Allâh will give ample means of subsistence to the weaker party and strengthen them against the wealthy transgressors.

37a. Not only in the highest places in paradise, but also in the highest places in this life — a truth which finds abundant illustration in the lives of the early Muslims.

39a. *Akhlafa* is used in the sense of *exceeding* or *surpassing so as to leave another thing behind* (from *khalf*, meaning *behind*) (*Arabic-English Lexicon* by Edward William Lane). Hence *yukhlifu-hû* here signifies that Allâh gives him such a great reward as to leave behind what he had spent in His way.

42 So on that day you will not control profit nor harm for one another. And We will say to those who were iniquitous: Taste the chastisement of the Fire, which you called a lie.

43 And when Our clear messages are recited to them, they say: This is naught but a man who desires to turn you away from that which your fathers worshipped. And they say: This is naught but a forged lie! And those who disbelieve say of the Truth when it comes to them: This is only clear enchantment!

44 And We have not given them any Books which they read, nor did We send to them before you a warner.^a

45 And those before them rejected (the truth), and these have not yet attained a tenth of that which We gave them ^a but they gave the lie to My messengers. How (terrible) was then My disapproval!

SECTION 6: Truth will prosper

46 Say: I exhort you only to one thing, that you rise up for Allâh's sake by twos and singly; then ponder! There is no madness in your companion. He is only a warner to you before a severe chastisement.

41a. Compare this with the last section, and it will be clear that the very persons mentioned there as the proud ones are spoken of here as the *jinn*.

44a. That is, no Book was ever given nor any warner ever raised that taught polytheism; or the meaning may be that, whereas warners appeared all about Arabia, Makkah had not yet seen one.

45a. That is, in power or in material prosperity the Quraish could not stand comparison with many of the early nations.

47 Say: Whatever reward I ask of you, that is only for yourselves. My reward is only with Allâh, and He is a Witness over all things.

48 Say: Surely my *Rabb* casts the Truth, the great Knower of the unseen.

49 Say: The Truth has come, and falsehood neither originates, nor reproduces.^a

50 Say: If I err, I err only to my own loss; and if I go aright, it is because of what my *Rabb* reveals to me. Surely He is Hearing, Nigh.

51 And could you see when they become terrified, but (then) there will be no escape and they will be seized from a near place;^a

52 And they will say: We believe in it. And how can they attain (to faith) from a distant place?^a

53 And they indeed disbelieved in it before, and they utter conjectures with regard to the unseen from a distant place.^a

54 And a barrier is placed between them and that which they desire,^a as was done with their partisans before. Surely they are in a disquieting doubt.

49a. The Truth may stand for Unity and falsehood for polytheism, the significance being that idol-worship will never again find access to Makkah. Compare 17:81: “Say: The Truth has come and falsehood vanished. Surely falsehood is ever bound to vanish”.

51a. In this world, they were seized upon at Badr and again at Makkah.

52a. For death shall then have removed them into the other world.

53a. Their conjectures that the Prophet will not be successful have no value, as they have no access to the unseen.

54a. Indeed, no punishment is greater than failure to attain that which a man desires most eagerly. This is the hell of this life.